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The Psychology of Self-Sabotage and Resistance

“Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands Resistance.” ([The War of Art, Steven Pressfield](#))

At certain times in life we experience a calling from our higher self, urging us to move in the direction of a more noble life. This calling often presents itself in our darker moments and we are struck with the realization that we have but two choices before us: to live in a superior manner, or to continue down a dead-end path that will only lead to more frustration and misery. While this apparition of our higher self may supply us with temporary inspiration, we rarely obey its orders for long. Instead we sink back into our habitual ways and live in obedience to our base desires, apathy, and cynicism.

Many people do not heed the call from their higher self because deep down they know just how difficult answering such a call would be. In the words of Nietzsche, “they fear their higher self because, when it speaks, it speaks demandingly” (Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human*) They desire the fruits of success, confidence, and courage, which accompany self-evolution, but they are unwilling to undergo the discipline and pain needed to attain these fruits. What such individuals lack in this situation is ambition. Without kindling what the poet Holderlin called “the sacred fire within”, few would be willing to undergo the Herculean task of effecting positive self-change.

“Ambition, I have come to believe, is the most primal and sacred fundament of our being. To feel ambition and to act upon it is to embrace the unique calling of our souls. Not to act upon that ambition is to turn our backs on ourselves and on the reason for our existence.” ([Steven Pressfield, Turning Pro](#))

A lack of ambition, however, is not the only thing holding us back. Sick of wasting our life drowning in our sorrows and bad habits, times arise when we deeply desire nothing other than the opportunity to put in the hard work and discipline needed to live in a superior manner. Yet for some reason, we just can’t make any progress. We feel a strong pull from our higher self, but we feel a

stronger pull in the opposite direction, opposing our every attempt to take a step forward in the right direction. Steven Pressfield called this inner opposition Resistance, and warned that it is the greatest enemy we will ever face.

“Resistance is the most toxic force on the planet...To yield to Resistance deforms our spirit. It stunts us and makes us less than we are and were born to be....As powerful as is our soul’s call to realization, so potent are the forces of Resistance arrayed against it.”

([Steven Pressfield, The War of Art](#))

Resistance is the set of psychobehavioral patterns and habits which inhibit us from heeding the call of our higher self. Excuses, rationalizations, fears, laziness, depression, anxiety, procrastination, and the tendency to self-medicate, are all manifestations of Resistance. As Resistance is that which opposes any movement from a lower state of being to a higher one, unless we learn to overcome it, a life of mediocrity will be our destiny.

“Resistance’s goal is not to wound or disable. Resistance aims to kill. Its target is the epicenter of our being: our genius, our soul, the unique and priceless gift we were put on earth to give and that no one else has but us...When we fight it, we are in a war to the death.” ([Steven Pressfield, The War of Art](#))

Around 2300 years ago in what is now Northern China, a lineage of military leaders put their collective wisdom into written form, shaping what is now known as Sun Tzu’s The Art of War. While the primary intention of the text was to provide military leaders with insight on how to subdue their enemies, its profundity lies in the fact that it offers timeless wisdom on how to deal with any form of conflict and any type of enemy. Thus, for advice on how to overcome Resistance – the enemy within – we can turn to The Art of War for insight.

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, in one hundred battles no danger. If you know yourself but not the enemy, one victory for one loss. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, in every battle certain defeat.” ([Sun Tzu, The Art of War](#))

As this ancient wisdom advises, to overcome Resistance and our tendency to self-sabotage, we must not ignore it or pretend it doesn’t exist, but study the typical traits it displays to better fortify ourselves against it.

The defining characteristic of Resistance is its universality. Whenever we use excuses to justify our slavish way of life, or allow apathy to define our days, we are engaging in tendencies which are universal and shared by all, even the most successful among us. It is not possible to eradicate Resistance from our life once and for all, instead we must see it as a part of human nature and learn to move forward in spite of its presence.

The reason Resistance is so hard to combat, and the tendency to self-sabotage so pervasive, is due to its Protean Nature. Resistance assumes many forms and changes so often that most of the time we are unaware of the ways it is opposing us. A particularly pernicious form that Resistance takes is the projecting of our internal Resistance onto people and situations. We then play the victim-role and blame those close to us, our job, society, the state of the world, or even Fate, for our mediocrity and misery. Projection is so damaging because it not only prevents us from taking the needed responsibility for our life, but it also harms our relationships with those close to us. To combat this tendency, Pressfield recommends we adopt the following mantra:

“Resistance arises from within. It is self-generated and self-perpetuated. Resistance is the enemy within.” ([The War of Art, Steven Pressfield](#))

While projection is certainly a dangerous form of Resistance, the most powerful manifestation comes in the form of fear. Fear in response to something potentially harmful is a natural and healthy response, but we do not only fear that which poses a threat to us, but also that which is our highest good. Abraham Maslow observed this feature of human nature, writing:

“We fear our highest possibilities...We are generally afraid to become that which we glimpse in our most perfect moments, under the most perfect conditions, under the conditions of the greatest courage.” ([Abraham Maslow, The Farther Reaches of Human Nature](#))

This highest good we fear Steven Pressfield called our “true calling”. To live in the service of such a calling is to centre our life around a form of productive work that we find challenging and intriguing. “The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it.” (Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art*) With this knowledge we can utilize our fear, and let it guide us in the direction of our highest possibilities. “What you fear is an indication of what you seek.” (Thomas Merton), wrote the American writer Thomas Merton.

But once we have pinpointed the form of productive work most suitable to us there is only one thing to do: start taking action every single day for the sake of centering our life around our true calling. Yet as we do, we can be sure Resistance will be there every step of the way, and like the Sirens of Odysseus, it will try to lure us away from our life-mission in seductive and enchanting ways. But just as Odysseus was able to overcome the Sirens by having his sailors stick bee wax in their ears and by tying himself to the mast of his ship, it is possible for us to resist the temptations of Resistance. The importance of doing so, thought Pressfield, cannot be overstated. For the ability to master Resistance, day in and day out, is what differentiates those who have “turned pro” in their respective fields, from those who are forever doomed to remain nothing but “amateurs”.

“Turning pro is like kicking a drug habit or stopping drinking. It’s a decision, a decision to which we must re-commit every day. Each day, the professional understands, he will wake up facing the same demons, the same Resistance, the same self-sabotage...The difference is that now he will not yield to those temptations. He will have mastered them, and he will continue to master them.” ([Steven Pressfield, Turning Pro](#))